



Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

House of Commons · London · SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 8092 Email JCNSS@parliament.uk Website www.parliament.uk



Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
London SW1A 2AS

[via email]

29 June 2022

Dear Minister,

Late cancellation of Committee appearance – JCNSS

Earlier this week, I copied you into a letter to the Minister for the Cabinet Office (MCO) and Paymaster General regarding his late cancellation of an appearance before the Committee that has been planned since March, but I understand you may not have yet had an opportunity to read it. The Committee planned to take evidence on Monday 4 July to conclude our inquiry into critical national infrastructure (CNI) and climate adaptation, which has considered the effectiveness of Government policy, legislation and decision-making in ensuring the resilience of UK CNI to the effects of climate change.

My letter was in response to an extraordinary letter from the Minister, claiming that he is “not best placed to give evidence at the session”, which he regards as a “technical and specialist matter”. As I set out in my reply, the fact that two pieces of written evidence have been submitted by the Minister does suggest rather strongly that he has some responsibilities in this policy area, not to mention [his assertion](#) that he is “the Lead Government Minister for resilience and security, and accordingly for CNI resilience”.

The Minister states that “My attendance at multiple committees across parliament could be sought on almost any topic” – yet this Committee has a distinct remit for cross-government issues, with our inquiries focusing more on scrutiny of the Cabinet Office than of any other department. It is completely inappropriate, then, to treat this in the manner of a request from a departmental select committee with a corresponding set of departmental Ministers. Indeed, it has been very common for your predecessors as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and predecessor MCOs to give evidence to JCNSS, on a very broad range of issues.

We now have agreement from BEIS and Defra Ministers to give evidence on this topic on 18 July, for which we are grateful, but a significant proportion of our questions are likely to be focused on cross-cutting issues, such as the resilience of CNI. It would be much more appropriate for those Ministers to appear in support of the MCO, rather than



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instead of him. He states that “it would not be appropriate or reasonable for me to speak to the work of other government departments” – so would it be reasonable for BEIS and Defra Ministers to be asked questions about Cabinet Office responsibilities, such as CNI resilience? If not, which Cabinet Office Minister would you propose we invite?

The unfortunate impression that we are gaining from this exchange is that there are **no Ministers with responsibility for the resilience of critical national infrastructure to the effects of climate change, nor for cross-government climate adaptation efforts**. There might be Ministers with responsibility for a specific area of CNI, but the MCO’s letter suggests that no single team or Minister is working on CNI and climate adaptation as a cross-cutting topic, including the significant interdependencies between CNI sectors. Can you confirm that this is the case? This would be quite a shocking admission from the Government at this stage in our inquiry, and one on which we might be forced to draw some quite damning conclusions in our forthcoming report. It would suggest a major hole at the centre of Government in preparation and planning on a crucial area of national security.

I understand that this incident forms part of a pattern of disrespectful behaviour by Government Ministers towards select committees, including late cancellations and refusals to give evidence—particularly on cross-government issues—so I am copying this letter to the Chairs of the Liaison Committees in both Houses.

I look forward to hearing from you at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP

Chair

Cc:

Rt Hon Michael Ellis QC MP, Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office

Sir Bernard Jenkin, Chair of the Liaison Committee, House of Commons

The Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Chair of the Liaison Committee, House of Lords

Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser



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Rt Hon Michael Ellis QC MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
HM Paymaster General
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
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[via email]

27 June 2022

Dear Minister,

Late cancellation of Committee appearance – JCNSS

Thank you for your letter of 27 June, setting out the reasons why you feel required to cancel your appearance before the Committee, as part of our inquiry into critical national infrastructure and climate adaptation, with only one week's notice.

As you know, Cabinet Office officials have been aware of this date since 28 March, and they were first notified in early March that the Committee would prefer to hear from other Government Ministers alongside you or CDL, in light of seemingly diffuse responsibility for this topic across Government. It has always been our understanding, particularly as written evidence to the Committee has always come through you, that it was a Cabinet Office coordinating responsibility for material on this topic to come to my Committee.

It would be no exaggeration to state that the Committee will be outraged at this late cancellation, and still more at the suggestion that this breakdown in communication is the responsibility of Committee Clerks.

You say, in your extremely belated letter, that Alok Sharma, along with a Defra and BEIS Minister, should be the relevant Minister. At no point has this suggestion been put to us. At the outset, it was precisely the suggestion of Committee Clerks that Alok, along with a Cabinet Office Minister (in your coordinating capacity), should be the representative asked to give evidence at this point. It was in fact your own team who suggested that, alongside you, representatives should instead be sought from BEIS and/or Defra, not least because Alok Sharma “doesn't have responsibility for national infrastructure or climate adaptation”!

You also indicate that the Clerks of our Committee have not sought to help to secure such attendance. They would have been very willing to do so, but it had not been



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understood that this was the expectation. Indeed, over the years of this Committee's existence, it has always been my impression that Cabinet Office rather jealously guarded their coordinating role, and would not have been happy for Committee Clerks to stray randomly around the Government securing Ministerial attendance at JCNSS sessions.

It is particularly unfortunate – despite the lengthy notice period – that in fact no BEIS or Defra Ministers have made themselves available to attend this session. The fact that your response to this turn of events is to belatedly cancel your own appearance at the session, rather than to offer to speak to your specific responsibilities for CNI resilience, is a rather damning indictment of the extent of Cabinet Office activity in this vital policy area, which – as the name suggests – is critical to the safety and security of the British people and to the smooth functioning of the British economy.

The Committee has sufficient questions about your responsibilities alone, yet we are not being offered the opportunity to discuss these with you. Your letter states that you would prefer not to give evidence on this topic at all, despite having already submitted [written evidence](#) to the inquiry in your capacity as Minister for CNI resilience. If the extent of your responsibilities is as you now suggest, then the evidence should surely have been submitted by BEIS and Defra Ministers.

For the avoidance of doubt, it is our **strong expectation** that you will give oral evidence on this topic, as the lead Minister for CNI resilience. The Committee is due to meet in private on Monday 18 July, in part to consider Heads of Report for this inquiry. We would consider rescheduling the evidence session for this date, if you can make yourself available to attend. We will leave it to you to convene other Ministers or senior officials to appear alongside you, including from other departments with relevant responsibilities, as required. I have copied two such Ministers into this letter, and the Clerk will notify the relevant parliamentary teams.

I look forward to hearing from you at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP

Chair

Cc:

**Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister
for the Cabinet Office**



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Jo Churchill MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Agri-Innovation and Climate Adaptation), Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

Rt Hon Greg Hands MP, Minister of State (Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change), Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

Sir Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser



Rt Hon Michael Ellis QC MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
HM Paymaster General
Cabinet Office 70 Whitehall London
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Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP
Chair, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy
House of Commons
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Our reference:

27 June 2022

Dear Margaret,

I write with reference to an invitation my office has received from the JCNSS to appear at your evidence session on Critical National Infrastructure and Climate Adaptation in July.

As you know, I appeared before you very recently to discuss the work of the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund, for which I am the responsible Minister. I very much recognise the vital and important work of the committee you chair.

I understand ministerial attendance at the session regarding Climate Adaptation has not been finalised, but that your officials have asked me to attend to give evidence.

The COP President, Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP, together with Ministers at BEIS, are all of the view that one of their own plus DEFRA should appear before you to speak on this topic, given their oversight of climate adaptation policy. I strongly agree with that assessment and I understand my officials have hitherto repeatedly expressed this firm position to your Clerks - namely that as the convening Minister only, rather than a minister with responsibility for the policies in question, I am not best placed to give evidence at the session.

My role means I am the convening Minister across a very wide array of cross-Government business. You will know that the Cabinet Office routinely plays a convening role when issues are so cross-cutting. This is the case in this instance, particularly so with regards to this technical and specialist matter. My attendance at multiple committees across parliament could be sought on almost any topic if those parameters were not accepted.

I should also like to highlight that my officials have been working in close concert with both the DEFRA and BEIS parliamentary teams to help secure Ministerial attendance. I am sure you will appreciate this is a good faith effort on the part of my civil servants to assist your committee and

is beyond their remit. I am sorry to report however that I have been told the Clerks of your Committee have failed to help engage with those departments.

At this juncture, I therefore have felt it necessary to write to you directly. I would reiterate that the Cabinet Office played a convening role to submit the best possible written evidence to the committee on the issue. However, it would not be appropriate or reasonable for me to speak to the work of other government departments, and to answer questions specifically about climate adaptation. That is not part of my function as Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General.

The original invitation indicated that the Committee would accept both BEIS and Defra Ministers appearing. The Cabinet Office Parliamentary team has secured, in principle, agreement that Ministers from BEIS and DEFRA can indeed attend.

I would be very grateful if your clerks could formally engage with their offices to ask that they appear.

Yours ever,

**Rt Hon Michael Ellis QC MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
HM Paymaster General**